

VOLUME 19, NO. 2 Summer 2001

BCI in the Classroom
Staff in Action
Kari Gaukler

Thanks to BCI-funded internships, lucky college students and thousands of elementary students each year are learning to appreciate bats...



 [View PDF version](#)
[4.03 MB]

Standing in front of a roomful of 22 fourth graders at Allan Elementary in east Austin, Texas, lights dimmed, I take a deep breath and nervously plunge into my slide presentation. With the first slide and the gasps from the children's mouths, I realize how lucky I am to be here. "Hi, my name is Kari Gaukler and I work at Bat Conservation International. How many of you have heard the word 'conservation' before?"

Five years ago, BCI pulled together local sponsors and businesses and began a successful internship program. Each year, BCI hires three interns to educate the public about bats. Two "Bat Interpreters" are present on summer weekend nights to answer questions at the Congress Avenue bridge in downtown Austin. In addition, one intern is responsible for presenting lectures to Austin-area elementary schools. I was fortunate enough to be hired for this position in fall, 1999.

As a senior at The University of Texas at Austin, I was preparing to receive a degree in Physical Anthropology with a minor in Biology with a focus on conservation. Searching through the internship database at the career center, I came across an internship at Bat Conservation International. "Bats?" I thought to myself, "Well, why not?" Although I knew next to nothing about bats, I was excited to find a position that focused on wildlife conservation and education so close to home.

On my first day, Bob Benson, BCI's Public Information Manager, handed me a video, *The Secret World of Bats*, a number of books, and a manila folder crammed with articles about bats. "First things first," he said. "You'll need to take a crash course on bats." I was directed to BCI's library where I spent almost every waking hour for the next two weeks learning everything I could about bats. After spending hours learning about bats at work, I would come home and eagerly curl up in bed with my new treasured book, *Bats in Question*. I began spending evenings at the Congress Avenue bridge. As I watched the magnificent emergence each evening, my interest grew even stronger. Barely able to contain all the interesting things I had learned, I frequently found myself blurting out facts to friends, neighbors, classmates, family, and just about anyone else who would listen.

Finally, I was ready to begin my lectures. I hit the schools armed with a slide projector, a stack of kids' brochures, a preserved bat specimen in a plastic display case, and *Discover Bats!*, BCI's multi-media education kit.

Luckily my task was facilitated not only by the fascinating subject, but also by some of the most entertaining, amusing, and intriguing photographs ever taken of bats. The reaction from kids and teachers was great. Even now I laugh to myself when I think of the predictable shouts of glee I would hear when they saw a picture of an epauletted fruit bat with its pouches stuffed full of fruit, its big, distended eyes, and soft, wet, pink tongue sticking out. They especially got a kick out of the "dancing" common vampire bat

(*Desmodus rotundus*). Students would jump up and strut, while others were certain that the bat was break dancing or performing the Macarena. "How did you get him to dance like that for you?" they would ask in wide-eyed amazement.

Initially, I was worried about questions I might not be able to answer and concepts I might not be able to explain. With many exceptional adaptations and nearly 1,000 species of bats, it was hard to know the answer to every question. Some of the tricky ones included, "How do bats go the bathroom?" "Why do vampire bats eat blood?" "What is the scientific name of the false vampire bat? The white fruit bat? The yellow-winged bat?" "How many bats are there in the whole world?" (not species, but actual numbers of bats), and from one studious second grader: "If an ounce of bat guano contains billions of bacteria, and a single guano deposit may contain thousands of bacterial species, then how can it be used for detergent?"

Through their questions I was learning along with the children. Although I knew the answers to most of the questions (with the exception of the species' names), I was learning to answer questions on a level that children could understand and relate to while incorporating other concepts. I can now quickly and comfortably explain to any child how a bat goes to the bathroom (they turn around and hang by their thumbs. Do you think you could do that?), or how bacteria can help improve detergents (some bacteria produce enzymes that "eat" away the dirt). I also now have a long list of bats that I can name and pronounce scientifically.

The children were astonished with what they learned about bats. Their jaws would drop and their eyes would get as big as baseballs when I told them that some flying foxes could have wingspans of up to six feet. Students often exclaimed, "That's as tall as my dad!" Furthermore, they were fascinated by the white Honduran fruit bats and their ability to make "tents" out of banana leaves and other foliage.

At times I was amazed at the capacity kids had to relate bats to themselves or other animals. For example, when they learned that the bulldog bat could catch fish, many of the children would say, "just like an eagle!" Or when they saw slides of the bats' faces they frequently compared them to other animals. Often, these analogies were essential to overcoming irrational fears that many of them had about bats. Bats seem much less scary when they are compared to a soft white bunny rabbit, a little dog, or a monkey. And when they learned that bats are responsible for many of our favorite fruits, eat mosquitoes, and pollinate flowers, they began to appreciate them whole-heartedly.

Standing in front of 40 eager faces at the end of my four-month internship, I turn off the slide projector and ask, "Any more questions?" Hands pop up all around me, kids are rising to their knees to be called on first, hands wiggle back and forth to get my attention. I fearlessly call on a young girl in the front row. "I want to help save bats," she proclaims. Eager to tell her how to become involved, I suddenly realize how effective and beneficial the BCI internship program is, not only for bat conservation and environmental education, but for me.

Kari Gaukler served as BCI's student intern during fall 1999 and spring 2000. Thereafter, she joined BCI's staff as a biological technician, assisting the program staff in international conservation and research projects. This coming fall, she plans to volunteer with the Peace Corps where she will continue her role as an environmental educator.

All articles in this issue:

- [The Western Pipistrelle](#)
- [Guyanese Villagers Discover Bats](#)
- [Bats and Biodiversity Education in Bulgaria](#)
- [BCI in the Classroom](#)
- [BCI Highlights](#)
- [Board Update](#)
- [A Fond Farewell](#)